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ABSTRACT

"Women Times Three--Women Working, Raising Children, Growing Older," a project conceived by the Saint Francis College Social Work Program, was implemented via 12 town meetings in 3 communities in Pennsylvania's Cambria County over a 3-month period in 1977. The project's purpose was to provide a low-key forum wherein both women and men of Appalachia could discuss, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and tolerance, sensitive issues raised by their changing status and life styles and the impact of public policies. The goal was achieved by using scholars in humanistic disciplines as moderators to facilitate discussion and clarify debate. The total attendance of 564 was above expectations, since this was an unaccustomed type of program for the area and the audiences; about half of those attending filled out a two-page evaluative questionnaire on the program. It proved possible to attract rural people to open-ended community discussion forums where they were willing to participate and be free of cynicism. The project served as a learning experience for social work students, for seminarians preparing for Third World service, and for participating academic humanists. The communities showed a strong interest and concern about women's changing roles and a desire for more public service discussions. (AN)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF RURAL WOMEN:

AN EMERGING AREA OF CONCERN FOR THE 1980's

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While considerable attention has been focused in recent years on the imperatives of women's rights, "women's lib," or feminism, the particular needs and concerns of rural women - and of the women of Appalachia - have received less publicity. In part this has been due to the universal nature of many of the movement's goals. Farm women, city women, mountain women, rich women, poor women - all have a stake, it has been asserted, in the correcting of existing inequalities. Public policy must be altered for the benefit of both men and women.

Yet, as the organized women's movement has begun to give broad scale support to the concerns first of one special interest group and then of another, the rural women's agenda has remained unvoiced. Certainly this is partly attributable to the more conservative nature of rural populations and in particular the reluctance of rural women to ally themselves with what they might perceive to be in any way radical, sensational, or threatening courses.

Today, however, economic forces and government policies and regulations are forcing certain issues into the Appalachian woman's line of vision. The miner's wife sees that the U.M.W. must now admit women into the mines to work. The farmer's wife sees fewer fields and more development houses around her. The widow of the Slovak steel worker sees that her pension doesn't go as far as it used to, but she also sees no useful place for herself in the world. Her children, like the farmer's children and the miner's children, have left Appalachia to find skilled work in more economically rewarding sections of the United States.

Cambria County is located in west-central Pennsylvania and possesses one of the larger rural populations in a state which has the largest number of rural residents in the United States. County residents are widely dispersed in a hilly landscape which assures regionalism and local isolation.

The Social Work Program of Saint Francis College believed that the area badly needed open-ended community discussions where public policy issues relating to

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women's changing roles could be voiced in open forums, even though the population here lacks any strong traditions of town meetings or group discussions. In fact, the largest ethnic group was originally recruited from Eastern Europe to provide cheap labor for the mines and the mills. Their descendants continue to be apathetic, partly as a result of the tradition of "company towns" with all their implications of control.

Recognizing the pressing needs of Appalachian women, the Saint Francis College Social Work Program obtained a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities through the Public Committee for the Humanities in Pennsylvania to place this problem squarely in the line of public vision. A series of twelve Town Meetings, "Hard Times: An Unfinished Agenda for Cambria County Women" popularized to "Women Times Three - Women Working, Raising Children, Growing Older," was implemented and held at three locations throughout Cambria County over a three-month period to permit residents in isolated areas the opportunity to express their thoughts and concerns in open forums and to make contact with others with similar concerns.

This paper examines the development of the project from its inception through its implementation. It details the project's rationale, its purpose and goals, its structure, its outreach to elected officials, its program format and content, and publicity measures utilized. Additionally, the project is viewed from the perspective of its impact on area residents and on participating college personnel. Finally, the paper examines the evaluation of the project.

Rationale for the Project:

The theme of the Town Meetings was to discuss the issues which have been raised by the changing status and life styles of women and men in a conservative and rural area where these topics have not been adequately discussed in public forums. While considerable attention has been focused in recent years on the

imperatives of women's issues or feminism, the particular needs and concerns of rural women - and of the women of Appalachia in particular - have received less publicity. Virtually no consideration has been given to providing a forum wherein rural women would have an opportunity to examine and discuss public policy issues which are impacting upon their lives.

Purpose and Goals of Project:

The purpose of the Town Meetings was to provide a low-key, non-threatening forum wherein both women and men could discuss sensitive issues in an atmosphere of mutual trust and tolerance. This specific goal was to be achieved by the use of scholars trained in humanistic disciplines whose perspectives and skills could be utilized by individuals not formally trained in those areas.

While we had hoped for a reasonable attendance, we did not anticipate large audiences as this is an unaccustomed type of programming for our area and for the audiences we were attempting to reach. Our total attendance of 564, consequently, was most gratifying.

Even more gratifying than numbers in attendance was the willingness of those attending to participate in the discussion. It was exciting to see communities come out to discuss issues of concern in a public forum. They were very healthy, exciting discussions and almost totally free of the cynicism one might expect to encounter in this kind of activity. Participants were willing to entertain unorthodox ideas, the level of discussion was high, and there was a great tolerance for the viewpoint of others.

Project Co-Sponsors and Community Support:

Our project co-sponsors jointly represented a broad spectrum of respected community and academic elements whose support was an important factor in reaching the diverse socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups represented in our county.

These sponsoring organizations, singly and together, gave us a grass roots flavor that touched all facets of the county's population and enhanced the success of our project in this rural, conservative area.

All five sponsoring organizations were non-profit. Saint Francis College is a small, liberal arts college centrally located in Cambria County in the village of Loretto, with a humanistic tradition dating back to the first half of the 19th century. The Family Life Bureau of the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese has contacts in all Catholic parishes of Cambria County and ongoing programs involving many of the target audience. The Johnstown Y.W.C.A. has a membership of over 3,500 women and girls in the area and is vitally interested in any issue which affects area women. Its involvement with this project is particularly relevant because it has been active in terms of non-degree continuing education for women and in the issue of health care for women. The needle trades are one of the largest employers of women in our area, and the local International Ladies Garment Workers Union is one of the largest in the district with a membership of 2,800. Its involvement with this project as co-sponsor is particularly appropriate because, since its formation nearly a century ago, the I.L.G.W.U. has always been in the forefront in terms of issues pertaining to social justice. The Cambria County Society of Farm Women, non-sectarian and non-political, has contacts with virtually all farming families in the county and ongoing programs involving many of the target audience.

Project Structure:

The program content was determined by representatives of our co-sponsoring organizations and a small Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from the community. Some of those represented on the Advisory Committee included two women coal miners, the president of the N.A.A.C.P., a member and advisor of the Cambria County 4-H Club, the director of patient education at Conemaugh Valley

Memorial Hospital, the program director of the Johnstown Y.W.C.A. and board member of Cambria-Somerset Planned Parenthood, and the chairperson of the Religious Studies Department of Saint Francis College.

The Advisory Committee decided to hold the meetings at three different locales throughout the county in order to permit audience participation county-wide. The sites chosen were Barnesboro, a mining community located in the north of the county with limited access on primitive roads; Ebensburg, the county seat, located in the middle of the county; and Johnstown, in the southern part of the county. Insofar as Johnstown is our largest population center with nearly 40,000 inhabitants, we decided to hold afternoon and evening meetings there to better serve the varied population of women we hoped to reach. Babysitting services were provided by the Y.W.C.A. at Johnstown to facilitate the attendance of mothers with young children.

Three main topics - Women Raising Children, Women Working, and Women Growing Older - were chosen to be presented at each site at monthly intervals for a total of twelve programs (two meetings, afternoon and evening, scheduled for the Johnstown site).

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Advisory Committee decided to utilize academic humanists as moderators for the public discussions in order to achieve the project goal of free and open discussion of sensitive issues in an atmosphere of mutual trust and tolerance. Committee members believed that the academic humanists' perspectives and skills could be utilized by individuals not formally trained in those areas. The committee members' belief was well founded for the academic humanists did well as we shall discuss later.

The decentralized format for the meetings, chosen deliberately to facilitate attendance for scattered populations dispersed over a large geographical area with virtually no public transportation and inadequate roads, had both advantages and

disadvantages. Advantages of the local meeting places included the sense of community in each small town and a sense of comfort in the meeting places, as well as the opportunity provided for public discussion of this kind, never possible before in such inaccessible regions.

One of the disadvantages of the decentralized format was the higher per unit cost of mounting a successful program series. Telephone costs were higher because calls from one community to another were long distance rather than local; transportation costs were higher because population is dispersed over a large geographical area, and there is no public transportation; dissemination of information and publicity about the programs cost more because the population to be reached was not covered by any single newspaper, radio, or television station.

Program Format:

Each meeting was one and one-half hours in length, and we commenced and concluded all meetings exactly as scheduled. Each program was preceded by a free half-hour art display and demonstration by area women artists. The arts and crafts utilized were printmaking, spinning, pottery making, and quilting. We developed the idea of accompanying the program with women's arts and crafts activities in order to attract larger audiences and to gain additional publicity, for we could then publicize each artist separately and expect a parallel article on her presentation.

An Additional Programming Determinant: The Flood:

In addition to the usual problems encountered in implementing meaningful programs in a rural area, the flood catastrophe which enveloped the hollows and valleys of our region on the night of July 19-20, 1977, causing over 80 deaths, thousands left homeless, and property damage in excess of $200 million, created

special heartaches for the Advisory Committee. Even after the co-sponsors and members of the Advisory Committee decided to proceed with the program series, we were faced with the realization that many of our well-laid plans for the project had literally been washed away. For example, television and videotape equipment that had been promised for our use was destroyed. Many key personnel with special skills who had volunteered their services to the project either were too involved in picking up the pieces of their own lives to help or were relocated elsewhere. Some of the local business firms we had contracted with for services never reopened after the flood or had to close down after re-opening because they were refused SBA loans.

Program Content:

As the programs traveled to the three communities that were participating, the audience appeared at ease with the surroundings as well as with others in attendance. Refreshments were continuously available, and there was considerable interest in the artisans who displayed their skills. One always had a sense of comfort walking into the meetings. There was no hostility toward the academic humanists as outsiders or "egghead" intellectuals. We received a number of comments on the questionnaires which typify the environment in which the discussions took place:

"Really nice ambience - informal and friendly."

"Local people felt free to speak - not belittled by professionals."

There was absolutely no shortage of people who wanted to participate, and it was inspiring to see the wide range of opinions and discussion as well as the friendly and positive interaction between rather disparate groups of young college students, older women, community leaders, community professionals, religious

leaders, professors and media people. The exchange of ideas between such diverse audiences seemed to us to be well worth the entire exercise and the investment of time and money. There are too few occasions when people from varied socio-economic classes, professions, and age groups join together for discussions of common interests and common problems. College students talking with elderly women about common concerns seems to the academic humanists, Advisory Committee, evaluators and observers to constitute an impressive use of government resources.

While everyone agreed that several of the programs were more problem-solving oriented than others, evaluators, observers, and academic humanist participants were pleased that there was so little of a "complaining" atmosphere at any of the meetings. The programs reached underlying basic issues of values, concerns, society's promises to us all and how these are or are not fulfilled.

Public policy issues discussions arrived at some of the following observations:

-Our society should provide publicly supported child care centers to support the growing number of working mothers.

-Our society should provide Social Security tax credits to the account of the woman who stays at home to raise her children.

-Women should receive equal pay for equal work.

-Women, both married as well as unmarried, should be afforded equal opportunity to work in all occupational job categories.

-Our society should provide adequate benefits in Social Security, hospitalization and pensions for women who are part-time workers or who take time out of their work life for child rearing.

-The government should increase the level of earnings permitted to retired citizens receiving Social Security so as not to jeopardize their present benefits.

-Medicare should more fully meet the needs of its subscribers.

-A comprehensive health care program should be provided to senior citizens.

-The government should ban mandatory retirement.

-There is a need to change the public attitude toward the elderly.

Publicity and Public Relations:

Publicity and public relations for the programs were exceptional.

We received live television coverage on prime time news programs in both Cambria and Blair counties as well as appearances by myself as program director and by members of the Advisory Committee on television talk shows, including WJAC-TV's "Cross-Section" and "Focus on Women" in Cambria County, and WTAJ-TV's "Big John Reilly Show" in Blair County. Announcements of programs were included in Sunday church programs on local radio stations and in church bulletins distributed at Sunday services. Awareness of the project was further heightened by Rita G. Glosser, moderator of the popular WJAC-TV television show "Focus on Women," who donated her services to do a 30-second television "promo" for the Town Meetings which appeared as a public service announcement on all area television stations.

The Johnstown Tribune-Democrat, the only daily newspaper serving the region, carried a number of feature articles on the meetings with accompanying photographs in most instances. Our area weekly newspapers gave the Town Meetings exceptional coverage with as many as three articles, including front page coverage, concerning the project in a single issue.

Public visibility of the project was greatly enhanced by the support of Mrs. Muriel Shapp and Mrs. Teresa Heinz. Mrs. Shapp, wife of former-Governor Milton Shapp, graciously consented to tape a 30-second "promo" supporting the meetings, which was aired by all area radio stations as a public service. Mrs. Heinz, wife

of U.S. Senator H. John Heinz, III, gave the project a tremendous boost by coming to Johnstown and spending the day with us. In the morning she taped a 15-minute television show lauding the Town Meetings, which was broadcast on WJAC-TV. After the taping, Mrs. Heinz was the guest of honor at a luncheon sponsored by the Advisory Committee of "Women Times Three." Following lunch, Mrs. Heinz toured the area to survey recovery efforts made after the July flood.

In all, community visibility was outstanding. The project title, "Women Times Three," was familiar to virtually everyone in the area, and numerous people who did not attend any of the meetings volunteered to us favorable comments they had heard about the meetings.

Contribution of the Academic Humanists and the Humanities:

Academic humanists and the humanities were central to the project from inception through implementation. As project planners, discussion leaders, resource people, and evaluators, their contributions to the program were obvious and substantial. We believe that without the humanists' involvement in this venture, discussion could well have broken down into "gripe sessions" or information exchanges. The input of humanistic disciplines and approaches was essential to effective dialogue.

As the Public Committee for the Humanities was aware, our meetings were held in small, hard-working communities of laboring people where both the audience and the media knew little about the Committee's efforts to reinforce the importance of the humanities in public life. Rather, meetings tended to focus on the specific issues relating to public policy. This we expected because these communities are not academically sophisticated and often see little value in "intellectual" pursuits which do not directly help them to wrest a living from the coal seams and from flood-ravaged hollows and valleys.

However, the kind of communities with which we were dealing did not prevent our academic humanists from ably demonstrating their ability to bridge this gap, through their own selection of material appropriate to these particular audiences. The films they chose, for example, for each of the three different program series raised the controversial and substantive issues to be discussed. This allowed the discussion leaders to remain neutral. But their contributions did not end with choosing the films. They facilitated discussion by asking simple, open-ended questions on the topics at hand. They clarified debate by drawing out the implications of various statements. After discussion had ended, they summarized the consensus of opinions so that there was a sense of closure to the program. They reached into history, literature, and political science to provide effective illustrations and commentaries on the issues under discussion. In all, they knew how to relate abstract questions to people not skilled in academic pursuits.

Evaluation:

Project evaluation was developed through the use of questionnaires, participants' comments, my notes and observations as project director, student evaluators trained to gauge audience response and group involvement, audiotapes of each program, and reports by three outside evaluators, one of whom was employed by the Public Committee for the Humanities in Pennsylvania and reported directly to the Committee, and two of whom were outside academicians identified by and employed by our Advisory Committee.

Analysis of Program Attendance:

Despite problems relating to the aftermath of the flood as well as problems inherent in programming in a rural area, the program must be judged a success. One criteria frequently utilized to gauge success of a project program is the number of people it attracts. Based on that measure alone, we far surpassed our

initial expectations. As mentioned earlier, 564 people attended the twelve Town Meetings. The count broke down to 101 in Barnesboro, 172 in Ebensburg, and 291 in Johnstown. Large numbers of repeat attendees were noted; in every case attendance increased; male attendance remained constant or rose and comprised 15-33% of the audience at any one program; a broad age range was noted, with large numbers of elderly at the third program series on "Growing Older."

While most of those attending were citizens of Cambria County, we also drew a significant number of participants from Blair, Somerset, and Bedford counties, with many people traveling long distances over back country roads made even more primitive as a result of the flood.

A two-page evaluative questionnaire filled out by slightly more than half of our audience members at each program provided us with valuable support for our conclusions regarding our programming. While working-class audiences frequently ignored the questionnaire, or completed only the first few (easier) questions, still the responses gave us helpful information.

We learned, for example, that approximately 60% of the residents in Barnesboro and Ebensburg rated newspaper ads as the most effective publicity in bringing them to the meetings; approximately 35% stated that they were brought by a friend, with radio and TV being noted by the balance of those responding. In Johnstown, on the other hand, slightly over half the participants said they had been brought by a friend; approximately 45% mentioned newspaper ads; radio and TV were noted a few times; the "Other" category followed "Friend" and "Newspaper" in frequency of response.

The occupations of those attending covered a vast spectrum. Listed were supply clerk, electrician, miner, social psychologist, teacher, steel worker, forester, secretary, surveyor, day care supervisor, social worker, affirmative

action director, bank manager, waitress, housewife, auto mechanic, psychiatrist, pediatrician, clergyman, former engineer, travel counselor, architect, sales, and director of vocational education. Many identified themselves as widowed or retired.

Interestingly, there were many objections in Ebensburg and Johnstown from young women answering the "Occupation of Head of Household" question. Older women answered with "Deceased" quite often (not seeing themselves as the head of their own household). In the age category of 45 or over, we learned that 75% of those responding had children, and many listed extensive families (eight or more).

The questionnaires also confirmed our impression that we had developed a constituency. This was reinforced not only by the data mentioned above, which indicated that large numbers were brought by friends, but also by the fact that approximately half of those attending any given meeting indicated on the questionnaire that they had attended a previous meeting or meetings. In other words, our programming was meaningful to the people in our area. They came; they participated; they returned, bringing their friends.

Evaluation by our two outside program evaluators also was most favorable. Both Dr. Betty Baer of the Social Work Department of the University of West Virginia and Dianne Herman of the Political Science Department of Lycoming College filed complimentary reports.

Public Response and Spinoff Activities Generated by the Programs:

Public response to the programs, as indicated by the variety of indices mentioned here, was overwhelmingly favorable. If, as it has been frequently said, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then we must surely be judged a success. A number of area organizations literally copied our format for their own purposes.

Not only did the project lead to emulation and generate a feeling of goodwill, as well as develop a constituency, but it also was directly responsible for a number of tangible spinoff activities. Some of these included the formation of a senior citizens group in Barnesboro, the hastening of the initiation of a Women's Resource Center at the Y.W.C.A., the institution of a local Boy Scout service program to assist the elderly, and the commencement of a caucus of women faculty at Saint Francis College.

Summary and Major Findings:

In conclusion, we were most gratified with our involvement with the project. We accomplished our goal of providing low-key, non-threatening forums wherein both men and women could discuss sensitive issues in an atmosphere of mutual trust and tolerance. As we had hoped, we achieved this specific goal through the use of scholars trained in humanistic disciplines whose perspectives and skills were utilized by individuals not formally trained in these areas. We managed to accomplish this in an atmosphere of comfort and acceptance. We have developed a reservoir of goodwill on which to build future Saint Francis College humanities programming. A follow-up is assuredly indicated.

Some of our major findings include the following:

1. Despite the lack of strong traditions of Town Meetings or group discussions, it is possible to attract rural people to open-ended community discussion forums. Nearly 600 people from four counties, representing a varied cross-section of ages, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic status, many traveling long distances over back country roads, attended the meetings.

2. The discussions were healthy, exciting, and almost totally free of the cynicism one might expect to encounter in this kind of activity. There was no shortage of people who wanted to participate.

3. The response of the audience to the questionnaires was very positive. Those attending found the Town Meetings worthwhile, the films which began the meetings interesting and moving, and the leaders' presentations useful.

4. The entire project served as a marvelous learning arena for social work students preparing for practice in rural settings and for seminarians preparing to minister to congregations in Third World countries.

5. The Town Meetings served as an excellent "in-service" orientation to community concerns for the participating academic humanists who had initially expressed reservations about involving themselves in discussions focused on social issues.

6. Rural communities have a strong interest and concern about issues pertaining to the changing role of women in our society.

7. The issues discussed generated more questions than answers and elicited interest in the College sponsoring more public service discussions.